

LABOR /MANAGEMENT: COOPERATION OR CONFLICT

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to identify ways in which labor and management can work in a cooperative spirit to advance the goal of the fire service. Research has shown that the traditional relationship between labor and management has been described as adversarial.

This study uses historical and descriptive research methodology to gain insight into the scope of the problem and possible solutions. Information from fire service publications and technical journals was used. The specific research questions addressed were:

1. What has been the traditional relationship between labor and management?
2. What has been the extent of cooperation between labor and management across the nation?
3. How can labor and management in the fire service interact to effectively and efficiently advance the goal of the fire service?

Research identified a cooperative approach which can be used to advance the goals of the fire service. This approach is a leadership partnership. The goal of which is to bring labor and management together in a partnership to share in decision making and responsibility for the direction in which the fire service will move into the 21st century.

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INTRODUCTION

The fire service is dedicated to protection of life and property from the effects of fire or other type of emergency (i.e., natural disaster, terrorism or medical emergency). In order to effectively and efficiently accomplish this goal, all persons involved in the provision of emergency service must work toward a common goal. This includes not only the fire fighters providing the service, but both management and the labor organizations. Cooperation is necessary because far more can be accomplished by two organizations working together toward a common goal than can be accomplished by either organization individually. As the fire service attempts to stay abreast of a technology that is advancing rapidly, efforts and resources directed toward training and planning are more fruitful than time spent resolving confrontations with labor organizations. The purpose of this research project was to identify ways in which labor and management can work in a cooperative spirit to advance the goal of the fire service.

This study uses historical and descriptive research methodology to gain insight into the scope of the problem and possible solutions. Information from fire service publications and technical journals was used. The specific research questions addressed were:

1. What has been the traditional relationship between labor and management?
2. What has been the extent of cooperation between labor and management across the nation?
3. How can labor and management in the fire service interact to effectively and efficiently advance the goal of the fire service?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The way in that labor and management interact has a profound effect on the effectiveness of an organization. William Bingham (1994) conducted a survey between labor and management in 200 randomly selected fire departments across the nation. The results of the survey showed that 87.5 percent of labor representatives and 82.1 percent of management representatives said that there was a “strong correlation between the current labor/management relationship and the effectiveness and efficiency of the department” (p. 124). In order for a workforce to be effective, it must understand and support the goals of an organization. It is counterproductive for labor and management to publically disagree on the direction that the department should go.

When labor and management reach an impasse, labor often turns to the local political machine or the media to present its position. The fire chief, as the chief executive officer and decision maker for the department, becomes the focal point of the attack. This was so prevalent in the late eighties and early nineties that the International Association of Fire Chief (IAFC) prepared a publication entitled “Fire Chief Under Attack: Labor-Management Conflict in the Fire Service.” According to the IAFC, “Chiefs who observe the status quo almost never come into conflict, while the chief who tries to change the system, for the better is attacked viciously and repeatedly” (p. 11). The intent of this paper is not to find faults with either labor or management, but to identity ways in which both sides can cooperate for the common goal.

In an effort to bring both labor and management to a common ground, the IAFC tested the concept of “Developing the Fire Service Leadership Partnership.” This was done In Cape Code and Barnstable County in Massachusetts. Thirteen chiefs and 13 union presidents participated. When the session was over an evaluation was conducted. The results of the evaluation were that both fire chiefs and union presidents agreed that the fire service must adapt a customer service philosophy, increase fire fighter involvement in setting goals and further trust and cooperation (Siegfried, 1995).

The research is significant to the fire service for several reasons. First, conflict between labor and management adversely affects the effectiveness and efficiency of a department (Bingham, 1994). The resolution of conflict requires time and resources from both labor and management. If conflict resolution were not necessary, then the time and resources could be put to the better use of advancing the department’s mission.

Second, if the fire service is going to follow a customer service philosophy then the customer must be considered in all decisions. The resolution of conflict between labor and management must be included in these decisions. According to Randy Bruegman (1995), “In resolving most conflicts, the most important questions to ask are, first ‘What is best for service to the community?’ and second, ‘What is best for the health and well being of the department?’” (p. 55) These questions establish that concern for the department is important, but only after the needs of the community are met. This is a difficult concept for labor to accept.

Third, from a public relations perspective, both labor and management will be viewed more favorably by the public, if it appears that the goals are common and conflict is not visible to the public.

This project is necessary to satisfy the requirements of the Executive Fire Officers Course titled "Executive Leadership." The research is relevant to the course because it deals with Labor Relations which an executive fire officer must cope with. The manner in which the executive fire officer is able to manage Labor Relations will directly affect the success of his or her administration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into three parts, each to cover an issue raised by the research questions. The purpose of the literature review is to discover what has been published about the issues.

The Traditional Relationship Between Labor and Management

In "Labor and Management Bridging the Gap," Daniel Law (1994) stated, "Since the beginning civilization, the relationship between those who direct the work and those who accomplish it has been fraught with conflict and resentment" (p. 26). As it relates

specifically to the fire service, the purpose of the labor organizations has been to enhance the compensation, benefits and working conditions of the members through collective unity (IAFC, 1993).

Bingham (1994) believes that “When referring to the relationship between labor and management in the fire service, certain terms such as the following are routinely applied: ‘conflict’, ‘adversarial’, ‘antagonistic’, ‘the necessary evil’, ‘disharmony’, ‘self-serving’, ‘power hungry’, ‘greedy’, and ‘warfare’” (p. 123). While not in all cases, some believe that unions have existed to oppose management and fight for zero-sum outcomes. Union leaders appear to have to cut their teeth on adversarialism (Reynolds, 1994).

Richard Earle writes, “Public sector management has traditionally dealt with organized labor unions with adversarial positions based on negotiations. This confrontational approach to problem solving filters throughout the organization and soon is viewed as a fact of life. This creates ineffective problem solving techniques, wasting valuable time and personnel resources, often without a viable solution to the original problem area being implemented” (p. 1).

When disputes arise or policies are being implemented, labor organizations view the change as win-lose situation. Edward Piderman wrote, “Any objection to the implementation of these new programs or policies was resolved through the grievance procedure. This delayed implementation and cost both sides time and money, especially in legal fees” (p. 95). According to Christopher Reynolds (1994), traditional

labor/management relations place emphasis on contract negotiations, grievance procedures, discipline administration and impasse/arbitration procedures.

Relations between labor and management have been strained through the years. Most fire departments are semi-military organizations. The management practices that were sufficient 50 years ago do not work with today's work force. It is time that these practices change to reflect the current workforce (Piderman, 1995).

Based on the literature reviewed, the traditional relationship between labor and management has been one that is adversarial and lends itself to conflict. The relationship has been one that is extremely formal. When conflicts arise, the conflicts are settled through grievance procedures, negotiations, and litigation. The formal conflict resolution causes a loss of time and resources to both organizations

The Extent of Cooperation Nationally Between Labor and Management

There are at least three different types of labor/management processes that are typically used in the public sector. The processes are process improvement, labor/management committees and win-win bargaining. Process improvement is the simplest and consists of changes in the bargaining process to clarify issues. Labor/management committees are as the name indicates, committees consisting of members from both labor and management. The last is win-win bargaining. It is the most comprehensive, yet the least poorly defined. Win-win bargaining attempts to substitute

collaboration and cooperation for a hostile, adversarial approach to problem solving (Earle, 1995).

In 1991, the City of Miami demonstrated its commitment to the labor/management process. The City as a partner with the labor force redesigned the manner in which citywide services were delivered. This assisted the city in addressing a projected budgetary shortfall (Piderman, 1995).

To summarize, the areas in which labor and management are currently cooperating are process improvement, labor/management committees, win-win bargaining, and a joint labor/management partnership to redesign city services.

Interaction Between Labor and Management to Create a Better Organization

Considering the traditional relationship between labor and management over the last 50 years any change to that relationship will be difficult. The collaboration necessary to effect that change will be based on a foundation of mutual respect and trust (Reynolds, 1994). Roger Henson (1995) wrote, "The first step in the forging that leadership partnership is mutual understanding of the individuals and their roles" (p. 83). Bingham (1994) states that "The bridge to understanding between labor and management is based on communication and common sense" (p. 123).

While both labor and management must be willing to form a leadership partnership, Thomas Siegfried (1995) believes that "the single most important factor in determining the

success or failure of any effort to change the relationship between fire service labor and management is a supportive city, county or district government” (p. 134). The creation of a leadership partnership will require a change in direction. If labor and management of the fire service is to remain competitive into the 21st century, it must shift its emphasis toward labor and management cooperation, responsibility, and reason (Bingham, 1994). Cooperation is the most important ingredient leading to the successful application of a labor and management agreement (Piderman, 1995).

The nation’s fire service must remain pro-active to adapt to the changing times. To accomplish this, the leaders of both labor and management must stand together in a common front to avoid divisiveness. Whenever possible, the sides should work out their problems so that each wins something and neither sacrifices too much. According to Reynolds (1994), “The bargaining approach that will be used by management and union officials into the next century will be dynamic and rely on mutual trust” (p. 12). The task facing executive fire officers is convincing union leaders of the potential for improvement and the benefit it can provide its members by participating in a leadership partnership (Reynolds, 1994).

In an effort to ensure smoother relationships between labor and management, the following strategies may be used:

- ◆ Use new techniques and criteria - replace posturing and questioning the other side’s credibility with good faith and communication;

- ◆ Educate employees - allow employees to learn more about and participate in the organization;
- ◆ Change the dialect - New nomenclature can be less provocative and expedite negotiations, lend credibility, and enhance the outcome;
- ◆ Prepare to meet the challenges of job security (Bingham, 1994).

Even though the above strategies may smooth out some of the changes necessary, both labor and management will be tested. Siegfried (1995) writes, “the promise of a new relationship between labor and management and the development of a Fire Service Leadership Partnership will test the maturity and commitment of chiefs and labor leaders” (p. 134). The test to commitment is extremely important because time is necessary for the system to be most responsive to the people of the organization. Change may take from seven to 10 years. The average tenure for a fire chief is only five years and that of a union president may be less (Henson, 1995).

When considering the length of time necessary to effect the change, consideration must be given to the entire organizations. Siegfried believes that “The greatest challenge of all for the fire service is in the near total retraining in labor management relations for all existing personnel... firefighters, EMT’s, company officers, battalion chiefs, assistant chiefs, deputy chiefs, union officers, and leaders and the chief of the department” (p. 93). A cooperative relationship is beneficial to all involved. The greatest risk is continuing the current adversarial relationship into the future and missing the opportunities that are being

presented to the fire service (On Scene, 1995).

Based on a review of the literature, it is possible for labor and management to interact to create a better organization. The relationship between labor and management must be based on cooperation, trust, credibility, communication, common sense, support of the local governments, education, and mutual understanding. Labor and management must develop a cooperative attitude to be competitive into the 21st century. The only risk is a failure to cooperate and continue with the adversarial relationship that has been place for at least fifty years.

PROCEDURES

The procedures used a historical review and self-administered survey. Information used for this report was gathered from several sources. First, a literature review was done at the National Emergency Training Center Learning Resource Center. Second, a survey was used to gather information on a national level.

Data and information were gathered from professional fire journals, trade journals and other publications. This information was used to form the basis of the recommendations contained in this report.

The survey instrument (Appendix A) was formulated to gather information on fire

service attitudes and practices as they relate to Labor/Management Relations. It contains nine questions. Four questions required a yes or no response. Five questions were open and allowed the responder to answer according to their department policies. A pilot survey was conducted of six chief officers of the Houston Fire Department. No questions were modified because of the pilot survey. Pilot survey participants stated the survey instrument was clear and concise.

The target population for the survey was the United States membership of the Metropolitan Fire Chief's Section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. This group represents 35 of the 50 states.

Packets were mailed to 90 fire chiefs. Each packet included the survey instrument and a letter (Appendix B) explaining the purpose of the survey. Seventy-seven surveys were returned by January 7, 1998, the requested date. This amounted to a return rate of 85.6 percent. As the surveys were received, they were reviewed for completeness. A decision was made to record as "no response" any answer that was different from the information requested. All 77 surveys returned are included in the analysis of the instrument (Appendix C).

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that all respondents completed the survey honestly and genuinely. While the survey did represent 35 of the 50 states, it should not be assumed that the responses received are totally representative of all fire departments in the United States.

RESULTS

Survey Results

The survey revealed that 98.7 percent of the fire departments that responded to the survey had unions that represent the fire fighters (Table 1).

Table 1

Surveyed Departments with Unionized Fire Fighters

Question 1.	Yes		No	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
Does a union represent your fire fighters?	76	98.7%	1	1.3%

Even though 98.7 percent of the departments surveyed are represented by unions, 22.4 percent do not have contracts. Some of the reasons given were the specific state was a right to work state and state law prohibits contracts without local option (Table 2).

Table 2

Departments with Labor Contracts

Question 2.	Yes		No	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
If yes, does your jurisdiction have a labor contract?	59	77.6%	17	22.4%

Question 3 asked what was the term of the contract in years. The responses were varied. The range is from one to five years. Some of the contracts provided for extensions. The average length of a contract is 2.7 years.

Question 4 asked who negotiates the contract for management. The question was open-ended and as such, there was no standard answer. Fifty-eight of the respondents answered this question. While the responses varied, the responses were grouped into five categories for simplification. The categories are Human Resources, Legal Department, Labor Relations Office, Fire Department, and Negotiation Teams. The purpose of the question was to determine the level of knowledge, relating to contract negotiations, that negotiators had. Table 3 contains the responses to Question 4.

Table 3

Responsibility for Negotiating Contracts

Question 4	Human Resource		Legal Department		Labor Office		Fire Department		Negotiating Team	
Who negotiates the contract for management?	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
	8	13.8%	4	6.9%	20	34.5%	9	15.5%	17	29.3%

Of the departments surveyed, 77.6 percent utilize joint labor/management committees. It is interesting to note that the response to this question is identical to the response to Question 2. Fifty-nine departments have contracts and 59 departments have joint labor/management committees (Table 4).

Table 4

Departments with Joint Labor/Management Committees

Question 5.	Yes		No	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
Does your department have any joint labor/management committees?	59	77.6%	17	22.4%

To explore the use of joint labor/management committees, Question 6 asked the respondents to list all joint labor/management committees. The question was open-ended and as such, there was not a standard answer. Some of the more prevalent committees are health, safety, wellness, apparatus, vehicle accident, and EMS.

Questions seven and eight are related. Question seven asks for the number of fire fighters that are in the union, while Question 8 asks for the number of fire fighters in the department. Seventy-six departments responded to both questions. Of the 76 departments responding, 12 departments had 100 percent participation in the union.

Since communication is important to the labor/management relationship, it was encouraging that 84.2 percent of the respondents had regular meetings with union leaders (Table 5).

Table 5

Regular Meetings Between Management and Union Leaders

Question 9.	Yes		No	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
Does management have regular meetings with union leaders?	64	84.2%	12	15.8%

Answers to Research Questions

1. **What has been the traditional relationship between labor and management?** Research identified the traditional relationship between labor and management as adversarial. The relationship has been further described as antagonistic, self-serving, fraught with conflict, and confrontational. Labor has existed to oppose management and to advance the health compensation and benefits of labor. Labor has used the media, courts, grievance procedures, local, state, and federal politics to complete its mission.

2. **What has been the extent of cooperation between labor and management across the nation?** At the present, the primary areas that are utilized to enhance cooperation between labor and management are process improvements, labor/management committees, win-win bargaining, and joint labor/management redesign of the work process. Process improvements are directed at improving the bargaining process to clarify issues and reduce hostility. Of the departments surveyed, 77.6 percent operated under labor agreements.

3. **How can labor and management in the fire service interact to effectively and efficiently advance the goal of the fire service?** Labor and management must enter into a Leadership Partnership. This partnership will test the commitment of both the fire chief and union leaders. It will be incumbent on the fire chief to convince the labor leaders of the benefits that can be obtained through a cooperative approach. The first step in this approach will be a change in attitudes. Attitudes can only be changed through education. It will be necessary to educate all personnel beginning with the fire fighter and progressing through the chief, union leaders and politicians.

DISCUSSION

From the beginning of civilization, there has been conflict between those that direct the work and those that carry out the tasks. The fire service is no different. The management philosophies of the fire service have their roots in the military. These philosophies have been in existence for nearly 50 years. In essence this philosophy expects an employee to carry out whatever directions received without question.

During this time emphasis has been placed on grievance procedures, contract negotiations, dispute administration and impasse/arbitration procedures. The emphasis was placed on these items because of conflict between labor and management.

Conflict has existed for different reasons. Over the years, conflict has been over basic issues such as compensation, benefits, health, and safety. The workforce and the issues facing the fire service have changed over the years, but the management philosophies have not. During the same time labor organizations have become more sophisticated and adapt at using the political arena to achieve their goals. Battles between labor and management in public arenas (i.e., courts, council meetings, media) are not beneficial to the men and women of the fire service because the public perception of the fire service suffers and delays in implementation are caused by these time-consuming processes (Piderman, 1995). According to Bruegman (1995), "In resolving most conflicts, the most important questions to ask are first, 'What is best for service to the community?' And second, 'What is best for the health and well-being of the department?'" (p. 55).

There are difficult issues facing both labor and management. If the fire service is to survive into the 21st century, then the time and resources spent by both labor and management can be better spent. Energies must be redirected to labor/management cooperation, responsibility and reason (Bingham, 1994). It is time for both sides to agree on the issues that are common and to agree to disagree on the other issues.

The cooperative approach can achieve more effective change quicker than either side can on its own. The first step in forging a leadership partnership is mutual understanding of the individuals and their roles (Henson, 1995). Bingham (1994) wrote,

“The bridge to understanding between labor and management is based on communication and common sense” (p. 123).

The survey conducted indicates that the traditional relationship between labor and management has begun to evolve to one that is cooperative. Of the responding departments 84.2 percent have regular meeting with union leaders. Further 77.6 percent of the departments use various labor/management committees.

If a leadership partnership is to be successful, it must be built on a foundation of mutual trust, honesty, credibility, and open, honest and timely communication. According to Reynolds (1994), “The tough task for the executive fire officer is to convince the union of the improvement and benefit it can provide its members by participation” (p.12).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fire chiefs should perform a self-evaluation of the state of cooperation between their administration and the local union. The purpose of the evaluation will be to determine if improvement in the area of cooperation is possible. Fire chiefs should strive to create a leadership partnership between labor and management.

The first step in creating a leadership partnership should be to ensure that

individuals understand their roles in the organization. It will be incumbent on the fire chief to convince the union leaders that fire fighters will benefit from a cooperative approach. Once union leaders are on board, it will be necessary to educate all chief officers, fire fighters, union leaders and politicians in the leadership partnership. Without education, many chief officers and fire fighters will continue in the management philosophies derived from the military.

To effectively change the organization's management approach will take seven to 10 years. It is extremely important that the transition to a leadership partnership begin now because the average tenure for a fire chief is approximately five years and a union president is less.

The transition to a leadership partnership will test the commitment and maturity of all involved. The only risk is continuing the current adversarial relationship and missing the opportunities available to the fire service through a cooperative approach.

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APPENDIX A

Labor Relations Survey

Executive Fire Officer Survey Labor Relations

Please answer the following questions by checking the appropriate box or filling in the blank.

1. Does a union represent your fire fighters?

☐ Yes☐ No
2. IF yes does your jurisdiction have a labor contract?

☐ Yes☐ No
3. What is the term of the contract? _____ Years
4. Who negotiates the contract for management? _____
5. Does your department have any joint labor/management committees?

☐ Yes☐ No
6. If the answer to No. 5 is yes, please list all joint labor/management committees.

7. How many fire fighters are in the union? _____
8. How many fire fighters are in the department? _____
9. Does management have regular meetings with union leaders?

☐ Yes☐ No

Please return by January 7, 1997 to:

Carl E. Matejka, Sr.
10714 Sageglow Dr.
Houston, Texas 77089
Fax: (713) 247-8911

APPENDIX B

Survey Letter

Carl E. Matejka, Sr.

10714 Sageglow Drive Houston, Texas 77089 Telephone (281) 481-3514

«

Dear :

First, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Carl Matejka, and I am an Assistant Chief with the Houston Fire Department. To increase my knowledge of the fire service and improve my management skills, I enrolled in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. To successfully fulfill the course requirements, students must prepare a research paper based upon a topic relevant to the fire service. The topic I have selected for the paper is "Labor/Management Relations."

You can assist me in this endeavor by completing and returning the enclosed survey. The survey maybe faxed to (713) 247-8911. The survey group is the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. In order for me to compile and analyze the information, please return the completed survey by **January 7, 1998**.

I would like to extend my appreciation to you for your assistance in this project. Should you have any questions, you may contact me at (281) 481-3514 (home) or at (713) 247-8652 (work).

Thank you,

Carl E. Matejka, Sr.
Assistant Fire Chief
Houston Fire Department

CEM

Enclosure

APPENDIX C

Survey Results

Question 1.	Yes		No		Total	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
	76	98.7%	1	1.3%	77	100%

Question 2.	Yes		No		Total	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
	59	77.6%	17	22.4%	76	100%

Question 3 Open Question

Question 4	Human Resource		Legal Dept.		Labor Office		Fire Dept.		Negotiating Team		Total	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
	8	13.8%	4	6.9%	20	34.5%	9	15.5%	17	29.3%	58	100%

Question 5.	Yes		No		Total	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
	59	77.6%	17	22.4%	76	100%

Question 6 Open Question

Question 7 Open Question

Question 8 Open Question

Question 9.	Yes		No		Total	
	#	Pct.	#	Pct.	#	Pct.
	64	84.2%	12	15.8%	76	100%

Surveys Mailed	90
Surveys Returned	77
Percent	85.6%